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CHAPTER VII

BIRTH AND INFANCY

Conception and Contraception

It was a common belief among the Gros Ventres that for conception to occur, sex relations must continue over a period of time, conception could not occur as the result of one copulation. The fact that a girl would be given in marriage before she reached physiological maturity tended to confirm this belief, which is also linked with another one, namely, that a girl would not menstruate unless and until she had experienced sex relations. This latter belief is reflected in comments made by old women concerning the young unmarried girls of the present day. Coming Daylight and Singer remarked on several occasions: "Nowadays girls are 'terrible.' They menstruate and have well-developed figures before they are married." These signs of physical maturity the old women take as absolute evidence of loose conduct on the part of the girl, regardless of what the facts in the individual case may be.

The Gros Ventres apparently recognized some relationship between conception and lactation. Coming Daylight, for instance, said: "The Indian women claim that they didn't become pregnant so soon if they nursed their babies. They always used to carry their infants about with them because, if they went far away and left them, their milk might spoil. The old-timers used to say that if a woman took good care of her children and kept them close to her, her family would not increase so rapidly. It is the young ones nowadays who have the bottle-fed babies!"

There were certain precautions, too, that a woman should take to keep her offspring properly spaced. "If you sit in the place from which a pregnant woman has just risen, you will conceive immediately. Dispose of the afterbirth quickly. Destroy all clothing worn during pregnancy, even moccasins, or give them to some woman past child-bearing age. If a woman put these clothes on again she would soon become pregnant. Nowadays though mo-

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842 thers wash such clothes and wear them again right after delivery—and they have a lot more babies now than they used to have, too."

[163] Coming Daylight said that formerly most women had only two or three children,—at most five,—and that some had none at all. Yet in the "old days" the population was large. Singer mentioned that although a man with several wives might have one as favorite, this would not make any difference. Each wife would have one or two children; no one of them would have a great many.[1]

These two old women, and our older men informants as well, were firmly convinced that "medicinal" contraceptives accounted for the small families. The old woman said: "Lots of women took medicine. There are roots for that [contraception]. Women who do not want children say, as an excuse, that one cannot keep things in order if there are children about. Not everybody had this kind of medicine, and one had to pay a high price for it—sometimes two or three horses. If a man were the owner of this type of medicine, he might demand in payment one of the other wives of the husband who obtained the medicine from him. If you take this kind of medicine you have to abide by certain rules. You must not let anyone who has children wear your robe; never sit on the bare ground; never hold an infant; don't sit on anyone's else bedding; above all, don't have intercourse with anyone other than your husband. If you break any of these rules you will conceive right away."

[837] To illustrate this point, one woman told about her cousin's wife who had taken medicine to prevent her having children. While her husband was away, she "threw in" with another man and became pregnant. Some women hesitated to take this kind of medicine because if a woman then became pregnant her husband would suspect infidelity, even though the wife had remained chaste but had "broken one of the other rules." Singer said that she would

[145] [1] This is confirmed by Denig, who was among the northern plains tribes for 20 years and was himself married to an Assiniboine. He makes the following observations, p. 513: (1) Not more than two out of five children live till youth is passed; (2) two to five children is the average and seven or eight of rare occurrence; (3) a woman is old at 35 and seldom healthy, menopause occurs at 40 or earlier, the usual period of child-bearing is 18 to 35, although a few start bearing at 15.

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have had good reason to have taken contraceptive medicine, since she had lost several children immediately after birth, but she was afraid to take it because her husband was "such a suspicious man." 842

A case was cited in which a man, who had this medicine, allowed only one of his nine wives to have a child, though he adopted at least one other child. It was believed that it was possible for a man to take contraceptive medicine, in which case it was not necessary for the wife to do so. Coming Daylight gave as an illustration the fact that her grandmother had no children by her first husband. Another example was given concerning a man who was known to have taken contraceptive medicine and none of whose wives had any children, although he adopted the son of one of them by a former marriage. Unfortunately he gave this adoptive son the medicine to drink and made the young man exceedingly unhappy, because he was very fond of children and none of his wives had any.

There were other medicines known which were said to prevent the birth of females and to permit males to be born. "If the wife of a man known to have this type of medicine gave birth to a daughter, the man would know it was not his child."

Contraceptive medicines might be offered to an individual direct by some supernatural being, but they could also be handed down in a family. Either a man or a woman could inherit this kind of medicine, use it personally, and treat others. It was said that many of these contraceptive medicines have been lost since for some time past it has been customary to bury the medicine with the individual owning it. The Boy was offered the knowledge of such medicine by a man, but he refused it.

Coming Daylight was offered this "power to know children" in a dream—that is, the power to avoid having children herself and to be able to administer the medicine to others. "The 'person' who wanted to give me the power told me, in my dream, to face the rising sun and he was just about to show me how to make a smudge from moss that grows on logs, when I told him: 'No: I would rather not have it.' Many a time 'they' tried to show me powers, but I would not be tricked into anything like that." As a matter of fact she loved children and wanted to have them. She ex- 842 787

842 [787] pressed this desire early in life and volunteered the following story of her experience.

[587] "My first husband, Dressed in White, went out hunting and brought back a lot of buffalo meat. I had my robe spread out just inside the door and he threw all the meat on it. Being hungry, I sat down there and was just about to eat the raw liver when he said: 'Wait! Don't eat that.' When I asked why not, he countered with the query: 'Do you like children?' To which I replied: 'You know I love children. I go wherever there is a baby—I love to have them on my lap.' So he said: 'Well, it is your fault that this is going to happen.' He took the oval piece of meat from the upper front quarter and roasted it in the coals. He then threw it to me in a careless way, instead of passing it to me as usual, and said: 'Here, you can have that for your son. You eat this plain—don't eat any tallow with it.' although they usually ate tallow with such lean meat. I said in disgust: 'E:ka:kya! I have always liked children,' and flung the meat out of the door. He said: 'Now that you have done this, you are going to have children from now on.' So, as he predicted, not long after that I became pregnant with my firstborn who was a boy. Unfortunately this boy died and I often wondered if it happened because I threw the meat too violently on that occasion when my husband had offered me the opportunity to choose whether or not I wished to bear children." Incidentally she remarked many times that she is happy she chose as she did,—otherwise now she would be all alone and her children have been so good to her.

The telling of the above incident brought to Coming Daylight's mind another, which confirms her belief in the relation between

[595] "medicine" and conception. "Crow Bull, my mother's brother,
[582] had four wives. His first wife did not have any children. Then he married an Assiniboine woman and still later took a third wife. Neither of the latter had children either until one time Crow Bull got mad. His third wife wanted to leave him for another man, but her relatives sent her back to Crow Bull. He, however, slept across from her bed and did not have intercourse with her. Shortly after this the Assiniboine woman did something to dis-

[789] please him and so he made up his mind: 'These two wives of mine are going to have children and settle down!' He had an old-fash-

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ioned doll which he wrapped up like a sack-baby and, one night without letting her know what he was doing, he raised up the covers on his third wife's bed and put this doll under her. He did the same with the Assiniboine woman and said: 'She will have a boy, too.' As he had predicted, each bore him a son, and these two are the only children Crow Bull had. He later gave this doll to one of his niece's daughters, having 'sterilized' the doll first, however, so that the girl was not affected and subsequently gave birth to five children."

Natural sterility was apparently not recognized by the Gros Ventres. If a couple was childless it was assumed that contraceptive medicines were used. While many individuals did not approve of the use of these medicines, each family had the right to do as it pleased in this matter without outside interference. Nevertheless, The Boy, alarmed at the falling birthrate which he attributed to the widespread use of these old-fashioned medicines, on two occasions in 1921 and 1922 spoke out boldly in public about the matter. He feels he was justified in doing so since he thinks there has been an improvement in the situation.

Although the use of these medicines was rated by our informants as the major factor in accounting for the small number of children per family, infant mortality was said to have been high, and infanticide was known.

For premature infants nothing could be done in the days before hospital care was known. Furthermore, where marked physical defects were obvious at birth, the chances that the infant would live were slight. It was stated, for instance, in regard to one woman who gave birth to a "little dog," that "had she been alone she would have done away with it, but her husband prevented her from doing so and everybody thought it was awful." Coming Daylight and Singer knew of two other actual instances of deformity,—one child who "looked like a beaver," and another who had "ears like a rabbit"—and both of these died shortly after birth. Coming Daylight remarked: "It seems as though we are so foolish the way we are ashamed of being deformed. One time when we were in town a white woman, whose face was quite disfigured, came into a restaurant where we were. My daughter told me: 'They [the whites] don't think anything of it. It can't be

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844 756 'someone' [a supernatural agent] to relieve women in labor. His wife was assisting a woman who was experiencing great difficulty. She went to her husband and said: 'What are you made of that you don't pity and help us?' He paid no attention at first but finally gave in to her pleas. He said: 'All right. I will pity you folks. You blow this powdered medicine root on the nape of that woman's neck. Then boil a bit of this other medicine and give it to her with this horn spoon. Make her drink from this very spoon.' The treatment was successful and the child was born very shortly thereafter."

[842] 844 Sometimes such doctors would predict the sex of the expected child, but a common saying was that a woman herself could tell because "a boy will lie in the womb with his knees up, whereas a girl will lie flat."

It was not necessary to have both a midwife and a doctor if the midwife herself knew medicines. For instance, Coming Daylight's grandmother had medicines for childbirth and always looked after women without calling in anyone else. After Coming Daylight had borne her first child, her grandmother taught her all these medicines so that she in turn could assist her female relatives. They had to pay each one who helped at childbirth. The doctor, or the midwife who administered medicines, would receive as much as a horse, while the others who assisted were paid by gifts of lengths of cloth, blankets, or other articles of that sort.

The woman assumed a kneeling position and grasped a crossbar. "They won't let you lie down unless you are so weak you can't help yourself."[4] If a woman were slow in childbirth, the midwife tried to manipulate the foetus in the right place in order to speed the delivery. She massaged the woman gently and talked to her, telling her: "Take it easy. Don't think that you are going to have a hard time. Think of pleasant things. Make it easier for yourself."

Most women were very quiet even when the pains were bad. They always said that if a woman cries out she drives the child back. Furthermore, they said that it is bad if a woman turns and twists in pain as the cord will get all tangled up around the child. Anyone assisting at the birth could cut the umbilical cord.

[4] Cf. Kroeber, 1908, p. 181.

3: Cooper E-5 (1938-1940) 1957
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*796 837 sexual mishap, join the Dance at all or permit their wives to join, even though such refusal was apt to entail a certain loss of face or status, to subject those who refused to the charge of being over-jealous weaklings, of not having "strong hearts," of not being able to take it. Most at least, perhaps all, who joined, suffered grave anxiety or humiliation or both. Some of the wives and ritual grandfathers, probably the majority, were, it is clear, very reluctant to submit themselves to the test, for fear of the penalties for failure, and, so far at least as these wives were concerned, for dislike of the anxiety, embarrassment and humiliation involved. Some other wives and grandfathers, probably a majority, were, it seems equally clear, quite the reverse of reluctant.

A certain air of secrecy surrounded this whole matter of the sex-test, and actual occurrences connected with it and, when the test and occurrences were talked about, they were commonly discussed in hushed tones. It was consequently very difficult for us to discover what proportion of failures occurred. The Boy seemed to think that failures were somewhat less frequent than did Coming Daylight and Singer, but all agreed that some failures did occur. Many stories and rumors ran the round of gossip. A younger, middle-aged informant, Cora Chandler, used to hear these stories. One of them, heard by Coming Daylight and told us, was that one couple said: "Let's lie here longer. There is nothing to worry about." "Some of the women," she stated, "liked it all right, but some of them didn't. . . . Some returned (from their grandfathers to their husbands) quickly and others would take a long time."

*796 842 After the test the ceremonial grandfathers and the women would get up and the latter would go back to their husbands in the Crazy Dance lodge. The attendants on watch at the door thereof would announce their arrival. Each husband would go to meet his wife who would give him back the pipe that she had taken with her and would give him the root (or some of it) that she had gotten from her grandfather. Then she went home to her lodge.

The purpose for which the root was used was not known to The Boy. To judge from a short dialogue recorded from Coming Daylight, it may have had something to do with fertility, child-

3: Cooper E-5 (1938-1940) 1957
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bearing, or child begetting. She had said to her husband on one occasion: "If I had joined it [the Crazy Dance] and had been given it [this root], I would use it." To this her husband replied: "You should not talk that way. You already have children. You should pray to the Supreme Being." In this connection it may be recalled that some once wanted Singer to join the Crazy Dance in order that her husband's other wife, pregnant at the time, would have a safe delivery. The root may also have been a medium through or by which long life was imparted to the woman.

The chief events of the fourth and last day of the Crazy Dance proper were, after the preliminary body painting, the fire dance and the bow rites.

According to The Boy and Thick, on this last day in their respective lodges the Crazy Dancers were painted up to represent owls,—why, we could not discover. Their bodies were painted yellow all over, to the elbows and knees; the forearms, and the legs from the knees down, solid black. On the chest was painted an owl, with wings spread, the wings represented by black strips extending along the arms. The dancers' left ears were daubed and plugged with white clay (and apparently a mushroom), so that hearing was blocked on that side. From the left side of the headband there hung an owl head (not a skull) over the left ear.

In preparation for the fire dance, the ritual grandfathers treated the soles of the dancers' feet, according to The Boy and Thick,—their whole bodies, according to Coming Daylight,—with medicine. The dancers also, Coming Daylight implied, chewed this root during the fire dance.

A prominent warrior "chief," from an age-group other than the one giving the dance, was then asked to make shavings out of a lodge pole for the fire. He would tell four of his outstanding wardeeds, and at each would make a motion as if starting to cut the shavings. After the fourth deed was told, he actually began making the shavings, continuing until he judged he had a pile big enough for the fire. Then he would light them. The fire was made in the middle of the Crazy Dance corral or lodge.

After the fire was started, there were four songs and four dances. One of these four, or else a song sung to the accompaniment